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Is a Just and Lasting Peace Possible?

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ABSTRACT

The right-wing drift in Israeli public opinion that brought Benjamin Netanyahu to power for the fourth time has deepened the existing political stalemate, sharpened internal Palestinian discontent with the Palestinian Authority (PA), and further undermined its legitimacy. After nearly a quarter of a century of negotiations, since the Madrid conference in late 1991, the PA appears to have reached the end of the line. Its attempt to “internationalize” the conflict by seeking recognition as a state by the UN Security Council and the General Assembly is meant in part to gain time and fill the political gap. Palestinian civil society groups perceive Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) as an alternative strategy to the failed “negotiated process” to end occupation even if it is a long term effort. A stable and just peace does not appear possible in the near future, and in the long run the nature of the solution need not be the one deemed at present as the only possible one.

The result of the Israeli elections of March 2015 that brought Benjamin Netanyahu to power again was not actually a surprise. Aside from some scare tactics on the eve of the elections, warning that ‘Arabs’ were flocking in droves to vote, which may have made a bit of a difference, the right-wing trend in Israeli political life is not new. There may be different explanations for this, but the central factor is that the State of Israel has been far too successful in warding off any substantial external pressure to end its occupation of Palestinian land. This is largely due to its influence over US policy in the region, in particular as pertains to Palestinians under occupation. As a result of this immunity, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has become a political football inside the dark tunnel of Israeli politics where the interest of politicians is electoral, careerist or even downright mercenary. And it will not emerge from this dead-end tunnel without external force or pressure.

Meanwhile, the process of confiscation of Palestinian land and settlement expansion continues as it did throughout the Oslo process, and the Zionist project in historic Palestine proceeds unabated. This has been the bane of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the source of its increasing delegitimation

among Palestinians, coupled with a failed 'negotiated process' that began with the Madrid Conference in late 1991. For Palestinians, it was never envisioned that the PA was established to function as a large municipality to administer the affairs of Palestinians under occupation on a permanent basis, and on top of that to see to it that Israel is secure. And after nearly a quarter of a century of 'negotiations', the PA appears to have reached the end of the line. This explains its attempt to 'internationalize' the conflict, as some PA officials described it, by seeking first to gain recognition as a state by the United Nations Security Council in 2011, and then the General Assembly in November 2012, after the failure of the previous step, where it gained recognition as a non-member observer state by the General Assembly. And finally, after the determined but failed shuttle diplomacy of US Secretary of State John Kerry that ended in early 2014, the PA decided to apply to join the International Criminal Court, a further step that it claimed was a new strategy. This decision builds on the ensuing political vacuum and on its firm belief that the Netanyahu government is wedded to the settler agenda as a first priority.

It is difficult to see that the PA is serious in its pursuit of such a confrontational strategy given that it will ultimately bring it into direct conflict with any Israeli government, which will no doubt retaliate. Various forms of retaliation have been tried in the past, usually beginning with withholding the transfer of taxes levied by Israel and owed to the PA, to opening of 'corruption files' on some in the PA leadership including Mahmoud Abbas himself in 2011, via supporters in the US Congress, on the eve of signing the last Cairo agreement for reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah, to which Israel objected.¹ Equally important is the built-in interest of the PA to preserve itself, which any extended confrontation with Israel will seriously threaten. On various occasions, indeed, Palestinian voices have called for the dissolution of the PA given the failed project of establishing an independent Palestinian state, which most Palestinians assumed would be the end result of the Oslo process. Yet there are some powerful interests behind the continued existence of the PA, including some PA officials who through various forms of extra-legal rents were able to benefit financially, which in part is the reason why the PA is widely held by Palestinians to be riddled with corruption. In addition, there has been considerable investment by the Palestinian private sector in various projects in the West Bank primarily but also in Gaza, as well as in Israel itself, for which any 'instability' that accrues as a result of the dissolution of the PA is inimical to its interest (see for instance Dana, 2014).

If the PA does not have a serious alternative to the status quo and is pursuing a confrontational stance vis-à-vis Israel for tactical purposes, aimed at reviving the moribund 'peace process', as many Palestinians believe, the same need not apply to Palestinians who in recent years have taken a different course. The boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement, espoused by organized civil

society groups, is meant to fill the breach left by the recalcitrance and inaction of the PA and fill the political vacuum after a moribund political process. As a strategy, it sought to unite various Palestinian constituencies including inside Israel and outside the Occupied Territories. As Peter Beinart aptly remarked:

Its three planks – an end to Israeli control of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, equality for Palestinian citizens of Israel and the return of Palestinian refugees – offers something for each of the three main Palestinian populations (those in the occupied territories, those inside Israel proper and refugees) and thus unites a divided people. As a nonviolent movement that speaks in the language of human rights and international law rather than Islamic theology, the movement also attracts progressive allies who would never join a movement defined by suicide bombings and the Hamas charter. (Beinart, 2015)

This is obviously a long-term strategy, and the South African example need not be replicated in exactly the same way, but Palestinians have few alternatives. And if the two-state solution has been made not viable by Israeli policies of parcelling up the West Bank and East Jerusalem into isolated cantons, then the nature of the solution to the conflict will ultimately have to change.

In turn, the Israeli government sought to counter BDS in various ways, including coining a 'marketable' name for it: delegitimization of Israel. And while Israel may succeed with some governments such as the US or Canada, it is an uphill struggle as far as turning the tide among civil society groups in Europe and among the youth in particular, also in the US and elsewhere. For Israel does not really have a viable solution given the increasingly hegemonic discourse of the right wing in Israeli public life and its influence on policies of the state. Some on the extreme right wing have entertained ideas for a 'solution', but they remain a small minority. Among them is Likud member Tzipi Hotovely, who is deputy foreign minister in the Netanyahu government formed in mid-2015. She opposes the two-state solution and is for the annexation of the West Bank, and after annexation, a 'gradual' process of granting Israeli citizenship to Palestinians can begin (Haaretz, 2015).

The fact is that the State of Israel does not have an alternative vision for a lasting peace with the Palestinians. The actual Israeli policy has been one of containment within the Separation Wall in the West Bank, and fragmentation of the Palestinian population into separate cantons in Jerusalem, the West Bank, and also Gaza. An apartheid actuality is in the process of being created within a de facto one-state reality that is the State of Israel. This has not escaped many Israeli leaders, but more often than not the one-state emerging reality has been used as political ammunition in the internecine fray of Israeli politics (Middle East Monitor, 2015). And while it is true that some on the far left and the far right of the Israeli political spectrum do advocate a one-state solution of sorts, they nevertheless remain separate individuals and a very small minority without organizational structures and a mass base, let alone being represented in any effective way in mainstream Israeli political life, even if they include the president of the State of Israel, Reuven Rivlin (Sheizaf, 2014).

Indeed, some on the left in Israel believe that “after nearly half a century of controlling the territories, most Israelis view the colonial regime as something to be taken for granted and the invalidation of the Palestinians’ rights as part of the natural order of things. The segregation of the buses was an interesting symbolic test that reflected reality. The average Israeli will rebel against apartheid only the day he’s barred from trading with Europe and has to wait three months for a visa to visit Paris” (Sternhell, 2015).

The single most important strategic asset that Palestinians have is that there are nearly 6 million of them in historic Palestine. To describe it as such may seem too passive and complacent, but demography has been at the heart of the conflict ever since the beginning of Zionist immigration to Palestine. For even now, quite a few in Israel still entertain the hope that a set of conditions may arise where another Nakba could be perpetrated against Palestinians, with mass expulsion or flight as happened in 1948. But such a contingency is difficult and would destabilize several neighbouring countries including Jordan, with which Israel has a peace treaty. And there is a limit to how far ‘voluntary’ emigration can depopulate the West Bank, as some Israelis hope. The sad fact is that the conflict will continue, and Palestinians will continue to pay the heavier price, even if a form of conflict management can be devised, probably sooner rather than later. Perhaps in the fullness of time a just and stable solution will be found, but the nature of this solution will not be the one so far touted as the only one possible.

Note

1. See *Chronic Kleptocracy: Corruption Within The Palestinian Political Establishment*. Hearing Before the Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia of the Committee on Foreign Affairs House of Representatives One Hundred Twelfth Congress, Second Session July 10, 2012 Serial No. 112–167. Available at <http://archives.republicans.foreignaffairs.house.gov/112/74960.pdf>

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